

National debt levels are "unsustainable," but U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer defended federal spending on the economy when speaking to small business owners and community college representatives Monday. Government investment in research is necessary for American technology companies to succeed, he said.

Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) chose the La Plata offices of the Energetics Technology Center, a nonprofit organization supporting explosives research, to promote a bill he has proposed to spend federal money on the development of a domestic industrial workforce, called the Job Opportunities Between our Shores Act.

"America will not succeed just by managing money and providing services," he said.

America is in danger of decline if manufacturing does not revive, Hoyer warned, citing the example of Spain hundreds of years ago, which in his telling tried to become a "financial center" instead of making things and lost its influence as a result. Also, foreign manufacturing might prompt American inventors to leave, he said.

For instance, the Kindle, an e-book reader, "was invented here, developed here and then taken to scale overseas. We are losing our edge by inventing things here and taking them to scale overseas," he said.

To help regain that edge, American companies should commit to making products in the United States, Hoyer said.

Citing the example of BMW, which made SUVs in South Carolina and sold some of them in Berlin, he said, "By golly, if a German company can come to America, profitably make SUVs and sell them back in Europe, we can do the same."

And government spending will make it happen, he said.

"A member of Congress can ... go to Washington and say, 'Hey, if we put money into Indian Head we will leverage that money into private-sector activity,'" with federal spending on community colleges accomplishing a similar goal, he said.

Bob Gates, who teaches business and technology classes at the College of Southern Maryland, echoed the sentiment when he said that the Center for Trades and Energy Training in Waldorf, which offers classes in carpentry, welding and other construction trades, never would have opened without a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

CSM had only recently branched out into the blue-collar trades, having focused on preparing students for work as nurses, engineers or teachers. With CTET and a school in Prince Frederick training nuclear power plant technicians, that focus has changed, Gates said.

"We worry that not enough of our young people are going on to college," but not every student belongs there, Gates said. "I think that we lose so much if we don't encourage these kids to go into the military, start a career, learn a trade. ... Do something that you truly love. If you love to work with your hands don't be a teacher. Do something you love."

But there are reasons American companies look overseas, said Donald Wooldridge, owner of Batching Systems, a Prince Frederick-based company that manufactures machines for industrial counting and sorting.

"The reality is of a small company that sells all over the world ... I have to deal with price point and labor issues around the world," Wooldridge said, both by outsourcing work and by hiring retired American scientists part time, even though this crowds out younger engineers who are launching their careers.

U.S. government largesse puts pressure on small companies, Wooldridge added.

Batching Systems has no government contracts, "but I compete with you guys every single day. And when I try to hire somebody making \$150,000 to \$160,000 [at a government contractor] and my price point break is \$90,000, I can only afford them when you dump them," Wooldridge said.

An American transition to information work could mean the creation of fewer jobs, said Mike Hutson, a representative of Triton Metals in Hollywood, while making things here requires having enough people willing to do the work.

"To 'Make It in America' we have to have people willing to make it in America," Hutson said, referring to the "Make It in America" agenda, a slate of economic bills, including the JOBS Act, proposed by congressional Democrats. "What you do here [at the Energetics Technology Center] is cool stuff, but how many people have to put their hands on it to make it?" Hutson asked.

Right now, American corporations can hire not only factory labor but also skilled work like engineering from poorer nations at much lower salaries. But a trend that has enticed American companies to outsource jobs to India and China could reverse itself as the emerging economies develop, pushing salaries up, Hoyer said.

And by hiring Americans, a manufacturing employer would pay more but get more productive and accurate workers, though this advantage might not exist for engineers, Hoyer said.